The Kearnys of Perth Amboy

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PUBLISHED BY

THE CITY OF PERTH AMBOY, NEW JERSEY

James J. Flynn, Jr., *Mayor*

1956

Commodore Lawrence Kearny, United States Navy
Mayor of Perth Amboy, 1848-1849

He was the only United States Naval Officer who was Mayor of his native city while on active duty.

The Kearnys of Perth Amboy

This booklet is designed to be an account, and a brief one, of the lives and services of only a part of the Kearny family. It should be understood that it is not a history of the Kearnys of Amboy, because several prominent Kearnys will not be mentioned in it. This pamphlet is concerned principally with the first Michael Kearny, the Irish immigrant, and two Kearnys who rendered outstanding service to the United States.

Just to show the versatility of the Kearnys, there is the case of a Michael Kearny not otherwise brought into this writing. This Michael Kearny, born at Perth Amboy, September 7, 1725, died April 5, 1779. He was the son of the first Amboy Kearny. He became a captain in the Royal Navy. In 1769 he was a member of the Governor's Council (Governor Franklin). On his tombstone in St. Peter's churchyard was inscribed, "In the naval service he was a brave and intrepid officer." And there is the following additional record:

> In 1778 this same Captain Michael Kearny was given the freedom of that most Irish of all Irish cities, Cork, with a parchment (still in existence) in a box blazoned with the arms of the City of Cork with the legend "Statis bene fide carnis," "You stand well in faith of yourself." The parchment reads in part, "Be it remembered that on the ninth day of January, one thousand seven hundred and seventy-eight, Captain Michael Kearny, employed by the Right Honorable Commissioners . . . was by unanimous consent of the Mayor, Sheriff and Common Council of the City of Cork admitted and enrolled a Freeman at Large of the said City. In testimony whereof the Seal of Office is hereunto affixed the day and year aforesaid."
>
> Signed: Wm. J. Snow, Town Clerk

This account of some members of the Kearny family of Perth Amboy deals especially with Commodore Lawrence Kearny of the United States Navy. It has to do also with the U.S.S. *Constellation,* which was the Commodore's flagship. Lawrence Kearny had the same kind of dash, courage, patriotism, and qualities of leadership that distinguished his famous

cousin, Major General "Phil" Kearny, one of the greatest Union generals of the Civil War. General "Phil" was of the original Kearny family of Perth Amboy. He was the great-great grandson of Michael Kearny, who came from Ireland in 1704 and settled in Perth Amboy in 1720. Michael Kearny died in Perth Amboy May 7, 1741 and is buried in Christ Church graveyard in Shrewsbury. His son, Philip, was born May 18, 1704 and died July 25, 1775 and is buried in St. Peter's graveyard.

Philip Kearny, 1767-1883, son of the above named Philip, was the grandfather of Major General Stephen Watts Kearny, who gained fame in the Mexican War and in the development of California. This Philip lived all his life in Perth Amboy and like many of the Kearnys is buried in St. Peter's Churchyard. He held many local and state offices. He was the great-grandfather of General "Phil" and grandfather of Lawrence Kearny. In 1847 General Stephen W. Kearny was given command of the Army of the West with instructions to capture New Mexico and California. After a march of 900 miles from Fort Leavenworth over the Great Plains and among the mountain ranges he arrived at Sante Fe' and took peaceable possession of the country in the name of the United States. He then marched toward California. Colonel John Fremont was an officer of the Army of the West and was under the command of Major General Stephen Watts Kearny. He and Commodore Robert Stockton, son of Richard Stockton, one of New Jersey's signers of the Declaration of Independence had taken possession of California after defeating the Mexican General Castro and his army with the assistance of California volunteers. It was General Kearny of Perth Amboy, not Colonel Fremont, who on February 8, 1847 proclaimed the annexation of California to the United States. Stockton, California was named for Commodore Stockton who later became a U. S. Senator from New Jersey. General Stephen Kearny was the first Governor of California. He died at Vera Cruz in October, 1848 at the age of fifty-four.

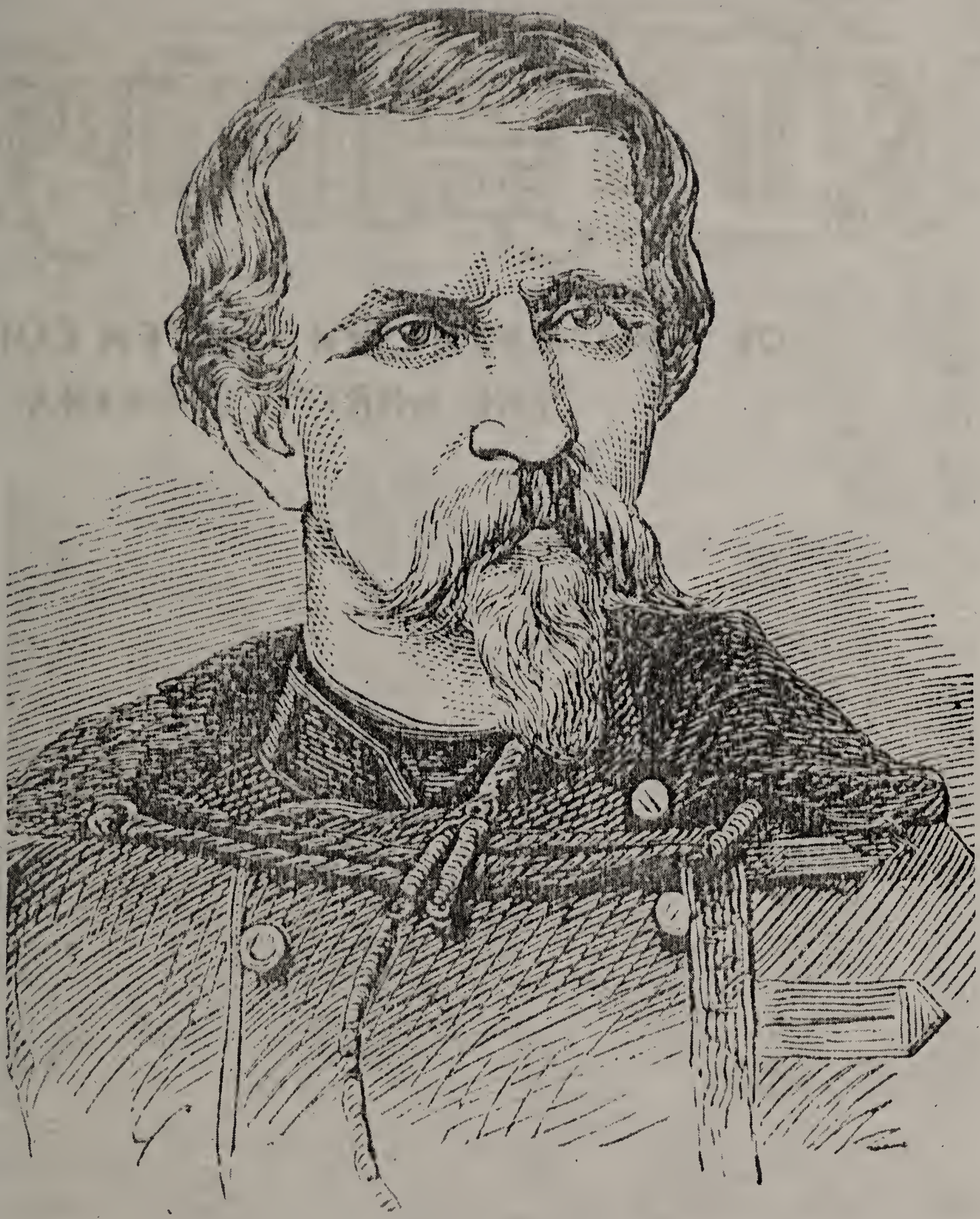
Contrary to a rather general Perth Amboy belief Major General "Phil" Kearny was not born in Perth Amboy and is not buried in St. Peter's churchyard. He was born in New York City June 1, 1814. He was killed at Chantilly, Virginia, September 1, 1862.

Major General "Phil" Kearny was the son of Philip and Susan Watts Kearny, and nephew of Stephen Watts Kearny. He was born into a family of great wealth and social position. His greatest interest as a boy was military. His family's objection prevented his entering West Point. He was offered $1,500 a year by the family if he would go into the ministry of the Episcopal Church. He refused and went to Columbia Law School. He graduated in 1833, but his desires were still the Army. In 1836 his grandfather's will left him a million dollars. He at once obtained a commission in the Army. He loved horses and they loved him, and he was a great and fearless rider from his early teens. On March 8, 1837 he was a second lieutenant in the U. S. Dragoons, of which his Uncle, Stephen Watts Kearny, was the commander.

After several years of military service he resigned from the Army. He bought an extensive country estate in New Jersey, including what is now the city of Kearny. Mr. Louis Booz, City Engineer of Perth Amboy, has a copy of the survey of the Philip Kearny estate. On the survey it is named "The Irish Tract." At the beginning of the Civil War he was living on his New Jersey estate and was appointed Brigadier General of volunteers of the 1st New Jersey Brigade. In the Virginia campaign under General McClellan and later under General Pope he showed his great ability as a leader of cavalry. He was a symbol of dash, spirit, courage, and surprise which, if he had lived, would have given him greater renown as a cavalry leader than that of the Confederate general, "Jeb" Stuart. Stedman's poem, "Kearny at Seven Pines" shows this.

Every man of his division wore a patch of scarlet cloth known as the "Kearny patch." Whenever he rode down the line his troops cheered him.

When Major General Kearny was killed at Chantilly, Virginia, General Lee, who had known Kearny in the Mexican War, sent the body under a flag of truce to General Pope, and delivered to Kearny's widow his sword, horse and saddle. General Scott called Kearny, "The bravest man I ever knew, and a perfect soldier." His body was placed in the Watts vault in Trinity Churchyard in New York. After fifty years, in 1912, it was removed to the National Cemetery at Arlington Virginia. At his grave the State of New Jersey has erected an eques-



General Philip Kearny

Commander of the First New Jersey Cavalry Brigade

trian statue in his honor, thus proclaiming to the nation that although he was not born in New Jersey, he was one of the Kearnys of Perth Amboy.

In St. Peter's graveyard, there is an unoccupied tomb. It was built by Philip Kearny, the General, to be his own tomb. After it was completed an underground brook flooded it. It bears the Kearny name and is known as the Kearny tomb.

KEARNY AT SEVEN PINES

So that soldiery legend is still on its journey,—
That story of Kearny who knew not to yield!
'T was the day which with Jameson, fierce Berry, and Birney,
Against twenty thousand he rallied the field.
Where the red volleys poured, where the clamor rose highest,
Where the dead lay in clumps through the dwarf oak and pine,
Where the arm from the thicket was surest and nighest,—
No charge like Phil Kearny's along the whole line.

When the battle went ill, and the bravest were solemn,
Near the dark Seven Pines, where we still held our ground,
He rode down the length of the withering column,
And his heart at our war-cry leapt up with a bound;
He snuffed, like his charger, the wind of the powder,—
His sword waved us on and we answered the sign;
Loud our cheer as we rushed, but his laugh rang the louder,
"There's the devil's own fun, boys, along the whole line!"

How he strode his brown steed! How we saw his blade brighten
In the one hand still left, — and the rein in his teeth!
He laughed like a boy when the holidays heighten,
But a soldier's glance shot from his visor beneath.
Up came the reserves to the melee infernal,
Asking where to go in, — through the clearing or pine!
"O, anywhere! Forward! 'T is all the same, Colonel:
You'll find lovely fighting along the whole line!"

O, evil the black shroud of night at Chantilly,
That hid him from sight of his men brave and tried!
Foul, foul sped the bullet that clipped the white lily,
The flower of our knighthood, the whole army's pride!
Yet we dream that he still, — in that shadowy region
Where the dead form their ranks at the wan drummer's sign,
Rides on, as of old, down the length of his legion,
And the word still is Forward! along the line.

EDMUND CLARENCE STEDMAN

There were six Philip Kearnys not to mention the prominent and wealthy Philip of Philadelphia, who was a brother of the first Amboy Michael. This Philip Kearny was a successful merchant as early as 1704. James Lawrence Kearny who died in

1921 owned a printed genealogy of the Kearny family commencing in 1506. Most of the early Kearnys lived in County Cork, Ireland. They married into such families as Roche, Gallwoy, O'Brien, and English families, too. Thomas Kearny, another brother of Michael, is named in the history of Trinity Church, New York, as contributing money in 1711.

For five generations the Kearny family had its home in Perth Amboy, from 1720 to 1921. For five generations St. Peters Church was the church home of the Kearnys. Many of them were vestrymen and several of them were wardens of the Church. Every man of the Kearny line was prominent in the affairs of the Church. They were devout Christians who served God and their fellowmen. They were eminent men in the service of the Province of East Jersey and later in the service of the state and nation.

The first Perth Amboy Kearny was Michael, a native of Ireland, born in 1669 in Cork. He first came to Philadelphia where he had a brother, Philip. Then he came to Monmouth County, and to Perth Amboy in 1720, and lived here the rest of his life although he owned an estate, "Morrisdon" which adjoined the estate of his father-in-law, Governor Lewis Morris, in Monmouth.

Michael Kearny held the following offices: secretary of the Province, surrogate, clerk of court of common pleas, and treasurer of the Province. He was a vestryman of St. Peter's for ten years and was a warden for two years.

His son, Philip, 1704-1775, was a lawyer and a wealthy landowner. He was a member of the Middlesex County bar and the New Jersey bar. Philip was married twice. His first wife was Lady Burney Dexter of Philadelphia, a wealthy widow. The children of Philip and his first wife were: Philip, Elizabeth, Susannah, and Ravaud. Ravaud Kearny was admitted to the bar in 1762. Ravaud was the Kearny who sold some land to William Dunlap, the artist, playwriter and biographer to add to his farm.

Philip Kearny and his first wife were the grandparents of Major General Stephen Watts Kearny who won distinction in the Mexican War, and who holds a prominent place in the history of California for his part in the development of that state. There is a Kearny Avenue in San Francisco, named for

him. They were the grandparents (Philip and his first wife) of Major General "Phil" Kearny, the gallant and brilliant fighter in the Mexican and Civil Wars. Philip Kearny's second wife was Isabella Hooper, daughter of Robert L. Hooper of Perth Amboy, chief justice of the Province. They were the grandparents of Commodore Lawrence Kearny, brilliant Naval officer and diplomat.

Michael Kearny, son of Philip and Isabella Hooper Kearny, was the father of Commodore Lawrence Kearny. This Michael Kearny was a young man in his twenties at the outbreak of the Revolution, and like many in New Jersey, was divided in his allegiance. The provincial Congress held him prisoner for a short time in 1776. After his release he went across to New York and served as an officer in the company of militia of Loyalists. When the war was over he accepted the new order and returned to Perth Amboy. His estate had been confiscated and he was a poor man. He was accepted by the people and was a respected and honored citizen.

He married Elizabeth Lawrence of Burlington, New Jersey. She was half-sister of Captain James Lawrence, whose name is written in Naval history because of his "Don't give up the ship." Their youngest son was Lawrence who became the Commodore. Elizabeth Kearny was fifteen years older than her brother. He lived in the Kearny home a considerable part of his teen years.

Elizabeth Lawrence Kearny had a large part in the education of her brother, James Lawrence. He entered the Navy as a midshipman in 1798 while still a boy in Perth Amboy. He took a leading part as an officer under Stephen Decatur in the retaking of the captured *Philadelphia* in the harbor of Tripoli. Lawrence Kearny was only fifteen years old at that time and was greatly influenced by his uncle, Captain Lawrence.

Elizabeth Kearny was a brilliant woman. She wrote many poems under the pen name of "Madam Scribblerus."

In 1780 Michael Kearny, Elizabeth's husband and father of Lawrence Kearny, built the Kearny Cottage on fifteen acres on High Street that were given to him by his father-in-law. Here Lawrence Kearny was born November 30, 1789 and here he died November 29, 1868. He was the youngest of eight children, all sons. Like several others of the Kearny line he was a vestryman of St. Peter's Church. He held that office 1851-1855

while residing at Perth Amboy on court martial duty. His father died when he was two years old and his mother when he was thirteen.

Lawrence Kearny became a midshipman in the U. S. Navy July 24, 1807 at the age of eighteen. His mother's strong nationalism remained an influence on his life although she died while he was a boy. His uncle, James Lawrence, was an influence, too.

Lawrence Kearny served on several naval vessels, the *Constitution*, the *President*, the *Enterprise*, and others. On December 2, 1826 Kearny was ordered to take command of the first class sloop, *Warren*, eighteen guns, for Mediterranean service. James Parker, a young man from Perth Amboy, son of his friend James Parker, was assigned to him as a clerk. In 1827 the *Warren* was on active duty in the harbor of Poros, at that time the seat of the Greek Government. A drawing of the "U. S. S. Warren Off Poros" was engraved and published by Francis Kearny, the Commodore's brother, in 1827.* Lawrence Kearny was in command of several naval vessels, and was in command of the East Indian Squadron. The historic old frigate, the *Constellation*, was his flagship.

The *Constellation* was built at Baltimore and launched September 7, 1797. She is now an old lady, a hundred and fifty nine years old. The building of the *Constellation* was authorized by the Congress in the Navy Act of 1794. It called for the building of six frigates, three of 44 guns of which the *Constitution* was one, and three of 36 guns. One of them was the *Constellation*. The Navy Act was the result of the plundering of American merchant ships by the warships of the Dey of Algiers. His warships captured many American vessels, eleven in October and November, 1793 with 113 Americans who were imprisoned until ransoms were paid. But the United States made a treaty with the piratical Dey, and the first active service of the *Constellation* was against France, which although not at war with the United States, was capturing American ships suspected of carrying goods to and from England.

**Francis was one of the greatest engravers in America. He had offices in New York and Philadelphia. His engraving of "The Last Supper" hangs in Kearny Cottage.*

The War of 1812 gave the Barbary pirates under the Dey an opportunity to make war on the United States. The *Constellation* was one of the ships sent to subdue the pirates in the harbor of Tripoli, under command of Decatur.

No American Naval vessel sailed more miles than the *Constellation*. She went back and forth across the Atlantic to the West Indies, the Orient, the Mediterranean, up and down the coast of Africa. In 1893 the old ship was tied up to a wharf at Newport, Rhode Island, and left to die, but in 1940 President Roosevelt had her put in full commission as "flagship" for Ernest King, Chief of Naval Operations, but she fought the war tied up at the wharf.

In 1946 the *Constellation* was moved to Boston Harbor and was doomed to be broken up. But the *Constellation* had been built at Baltimore and Baltimore wanted her back. As a result of action by a civic group of that city, the Navy delivered her to Baltimore. The civic group raised $50,000 and the city appropriated $50,000. Baltimore has her as a "shrine of each patriot's devotion."

The Open Door Policy in China was due to Commodore Kearny. The British had by war obtained right of trade with China, but Commodore Kearny obtained it for the United States by diplomacy.

On July 5, 1843 the East Indian Squadron under Commodore Kearny arrived at Honolulu, and found that under threat from Lord George Paulet, Commanding H. M. S. Carysport, to open fire on the city, the Hawaian Islands had been provisionally ceded to Lord Paulet, subject to ratification by the British government. The British flag was flying. The Commodore protested to his Majesty, Konehameka III, that he would hold him and Captain Lord George Paulet "answerable for any and every act" against the rights of a citizen of the United States. Kearny reported the situation to the United States government and, as a result, the British relinquished possession of the Islands. If Commodore Kearny had not taken prompt and vigorous action, Hawaii today would probably be a British commonwealth instead of a U. S. territory with the likelihood of becoming the 49th or 50th State. Again the sailor diplomat settled an international incident to the credit of his country.

THE KEARNY COTTAGE

On High Street, South of Gordon Street, about 1800, on the site of the present residence of Mr. and Mrs. William C. Wilentz, but nearer the street.

In the biographies of American Naval Officers, Commodore Lawrence Kearny is the only one who, while on active duty, served as Mayor of his native city. He was Mayor of Perth Amboy 1848-1849. In 1849 he was Commander of Norfolk Navy Yard, and in 1848-1851, as previously stated, he was on court martial duty and residing in his home, Kearny Cottage. Here his beloved, wife, Josephine, died Feb. 13, 1849, while the Commodore was Mayor.

Old Amboy was a town that inspired love of home and church, and so it is today although much of its old time beauty and grandeur have departed, and St. Peter's is only one of many churches and synagogues that serve the people and have loyal sons and daughters who serve city, county and state.

This brief family sketch deals with the Kearnys, but there were other families that lived here for several generations, beginning with the first days of Amboy. The Parker family was one of them. But no family anywhere ever had greater love for home town and home church than the Kearnys.

Amboy was the center of culture of the colony. It was the seat of government. Its beautiful and commodious harbor was filled with ships from across the sea and from all other colonial ports.

THE
KEARNY COTTAGE
1956

The Kearny home in Perth Amboy was always known as the Kearny Cottage. Here James Lawrence Kearny, son of the Commodore, was born April 19, 1846, and here he died December 16, 1921. He lived all his life in the cottage and for more than forty years was a vestryman and warden of St. Peter's. On every St. Patrick's Day, he raised the Irish flag at Kearny Cottage.

Commodore Lawrence Kearny wandered for years on the face of the deep and into most of the ports of the world on naval and diplomatic missions, but, however far his duty called him, his thoughts were ever truant to the city on Raritan Bay and to the Cottage where he was born. And let it be remembered that Amboy was a beautiful place, described by the Proprietors of East Jersey as "a sweet, wholesome, and delightful place, proper for trade by reason of its commodious situation upon a safe harbor." And let us remember that its present City Seal, adopted in 1718, has the words "Portus Optimus," the greatest port. His wife went with the Commodore on some of his voyages but he never had a home except the Kearny Cottage. To him Perth Amboy was always the delectable place. Longfellow's lines well portray Commodore Lawrence Kearny's thoughts of home:

"Often I think of the beautiful town
That is seated by the sea;
Often in thoughts go up and down
The pleasant streets of that dear old
Town,
And my youth comes back to me."

When James Lawrence Kearny died in the Cottage in 1921, his line from Michael Kearny became extinct.

In old St. Peter's churchyard, a visitor may pause and read this modest inscription on an upright stone.

In Memory of

Lawrence Kearny, U.S. Navy

Josephine

Wife of Lawrence Kearny, U.S.N.

James Lawrence Kearny 1846-1921

About 1922 the demand for improvements called for the razing of The Kearny Cottage. That would have been its fate except for the intervention of two people who cherished history, Mr. Harold E. Pickersgill and Miss Catharine L. McCormick. They were responsible for the organization of the Perth Amboy Historical Society (now The Kearny Cottage Association) The organization took over the custody of the Cottage, secured from the City government a site in the City Park near the Raritan River to which its was moved in 1924, facing Brighton Avenue. In 1936 Commissioner Albert G. Waters, moved it to its present site, in the park, on Catalpa Avenue. Louis Booz, City Engineer, supervised both movings.

Commodore Kearny in a letter written on board his flagship said, "Woe to him who ventures upon thy sacred soil, my old Cottage, and draws a nail. Inch by inch shalt thy weather beaten sides bend to the blast and crack and split in very contempt of modern storms, and in humbleness of thy altitude stand a monument of endurance." And so may she stand, one of the few monuments of old Amboy that have not fallen before the march of "progress."

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